

Prof. Schlesinger teaches philosophy at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

HUMILITY

In a letter of admonition to his eldest son, Ramban (Nahmanides) speaks of “the quality of humility, which is better than all things good.”¹

Ramban is by no means alone in rating humility or modesty as the supreme moral quality. The following are some well-known examples which support the view that this particular trait is the noblest of all virtues:

[1] *Moshe Rabbenu* displayed through his actions a wide range of virtues. Yet only one is singled out for explicit mention, *modesty*: “Now the man Moses was very meek, more than all the men on the face of the earth” (Num. 12:3).

[2] *Hazal* name but one among human characteristics that is indispensable for the acquisition of prophetic inspiration, *humility*.²

[3] With respect to all human qualities, the Rambam (Maimonides) advocates the “golden mean”—nothing too much, nor too little. He makes, however, one exception: *modesty* has no limit—the more, the better.

At the same time, though, the concept of *humility*—unlike any other virtue—seems to be involved in a number of perplexities and paradoxes. First, if it is indeed the supreme moral rectitude, then it surely follows that this characteristic ought most fervently be sought. Yet there is far greater uncertainty concerning the nature of this than of any other moral quality. In philosophical literature we find more than a dozen disparate accounts of the notion of *modesty*. Can it be our duty to strive assiduously to acquire a trait about which there are so many conflicting accounts?

Contrasting the trouble some dictionaries have in defining the term “*humility*” with the relative ease with which they defined other moral terms may provide a quick impression of the peculiar difficulties afflicting the notion of *humility*. For example, *Webster’s 9th Collegiate Dictionary* gives for the familiar term “*compassion*” the helpful definition “*sympathetic consciousness of others’ distress with a desire to alleviate it.*” Someone unfamiliar with the concept should unquestionably find this instructive. Then again the definition of “*generosity*” which includes “*liberality in giving*” is also informative. On the other hand, the definition for “*humble*” goes “*not proud or haughty; not arrogant or assertive.*” The definition provides the antinomies of “*humble*” which may be of help to one unfamiliar with the word, but not to somebody ignorant of the very concept that word represents. Imagine a visitor from an alien culture where the whole idea of “*marriage*”

is unknown and in reply to his inquiry "What is a married man?" we say "A man who is not a bachelor." In the case of "humble" Webster's does not do any better.

Another oddity follows. It is very common in other areas of philosophy outside the domain of human virtues to come across a concept that eludes our attempts to capture it through an adequate definition; nevertheless, under all actual circumstances we know for sure whether we have or have not an instance of it before us. For example, the notion of understanding the sentence *S*, according to some, should be explicated as "being able to enumerate the truth-conditions of *S*," according to others as "having the ability to verify it," "being able to act in a manner *S* calls for," or even "capable of forming a mental picture corresponding to *S*." Now though I may know no reason to prefer one analysis over another, still, when presented with any of the vast number of sentences I fail to understand, I am capable of determining in a split second that I do not understand it, and when presented with one of the few I do understand, I readily recognize it as such.

The concept of "humility" belongs to the relatively very small class that form an exception to this general rule. Not only does no consensus about the correct definition exist but in numerous cases where we have a full physical description of a given act or a set of acts, it is impossible to determine whether we have before us a manifestation of humility or the lack of it. For example, *X* may recount his skill and successes as a defense lawyer. Neither in the case where he is, in fact, a good attorney, nor in the case where he is not, does it necessarily follow that he is deficient in humility. He may be in financial trouble and desperately needs new clients. Consider *Y*, who during a long conversation continuously describes his intellectual, professional and social achievements. His behavior could be the manifestation of something far removed from haughtiness or arrogance: *Y* may suffer from a serious sense of inadequacy, and his feelings of inferiority may require continual verbal boosting. Clearly only someone fairly well acquainted with *X* or *Y*, having observed their behavior under a variety of circumstances, could make a reliable assessment of what *X*'s or *Y*'s current behavior amounts to.

In addition, it is puzzling that humility—the presence or absence of which in a given individual benefits or harms others relatively little—should be so highly valued. There are good reasons, for instance, to condemn and be wary of individuals who are cruel, violent, vindictive, dishonest, greedy and so on, as they constitute a potential threat to one's well-being. On the other hand, while we may find the manifestation of excessive conceit irritating, even a person who is utterly devoid of all modesty seems to constitute no serious menace to the material or mental comfort of others.

In the April 22, 1991 issue of *The New Republic* there was a major article about Ramsey Clark, which describes Ramsey as "a man who carries modesty to the point of arrogance." Readers probably varied in the degree

to which they found this quip amusing, but certainly only a few felt totally mystified as to its meaning. It would have been very different if the article had said, "He carries courage to the point of cowardice" or "He carries honesty to the point of duplicity." These descriptions are thoroughly unclear. It is yet another indication of the unique nature of humility that it can be practiced—theoretically at least—on any number of different levels. Thus one individual may exhibit excessive vanity about having succeeded in being humble about all his other virtues, while another, who has managed to shed all vanity about his humility in general as well, may yet focus his self-admiration on this very accomplishment itself.

II.

To gain an idea how slippery our topic is let me cite some of the better known theses on modesty.

Thesis 1: It has often been said that a modest individual is required not only to refrain from boasting, but even to understate his true worth. Admittedly, it is somewhat jarring to listen to someone sing his own praise. Indeed, King Solomon cautioned, "Let another praise you, and not your own lips" (Pr. 27:2). Nevertheless, is it possible that speaking untruly is a necessary element in the high virtue of modesty? Does not belittling oneself dishonestly amount to false modesty?

An advocate of Theses 1 could claim support from Rashi (Bava Metziah 23b), who says that if one is asked whether he has knowledge of a certain Talmudic tractate, then even if he has, he should, out of modesty, deny it.

Commentators have interpreted Rashi in different ways, but one thing seems beyond dispute: Rashi is not making a universal recommendation. He does not suggest that modesty forbids one to admit possessing any sort of competence, skill, aptitude, knowledge, or of having contributed anything of value. He is referring to a single case, mastery of a *sugya*. One may conjecture about the reason he limited himself to this one case, but many possibilities exist. Perhaps in the context of the knowledge of a tractate, perfection just does not exist as "there is no comparison between one who has studied a passage a hundred times and one who has studied it 101 times." Thus the questioner may have intended to ask whether the person had an *adequate* knowledge of a certain tractate, and this he may possess. However, because of the ambiguity involved, Rashi advises giving a negative answer.

Thesis 2: Humility has sometimes been said to amount to the realization that no matter what heights one has reached, one is still infinitesimal in

comparison with the Almighty. Undoubtedly, it would be utterly foolish for anyone to fail to realize his nothingness before Heaven. But it would seem that merely avoiding being utterly foolish does not amount to the most highly praised human quality.

Thesis 3: In the June 1989 issue of one of the leading philosophical monthlies, the *Journal of Philosophy*, Prof. Judith Driver, in her essay "The Virtues of Ignorance," suggests that modesty is "underestimating one's worth." Note: not *understating*, which implies falsehood, but *underestimating*, which amounts to an honest mistake.

Strangely enough, this latest suggestion harbors more difficulties than the earlier ones it proposes to replace. First, we might ask, should we admire an exceptionally skillful heart surgeon who is convinced he is incapable even to treat properly an ingrown toenail? Surely such an individual would be responsible for the death of many whom he could have saved. Secondly, we are bid to emulate virtuous individuals and to strive to acquire qualities similar to theirs. How is one supposed to endeavor to outsmart himself and sincerely adopt false beliefs about his skills and achievements, whatever they might be?

Furthermore, assuming that in the context of humility there is no limit as to where to stop, for the humbler the better, what attitude is to be recommended, for instance, for the world's leading mathematician? If he sincerely believed that he were no more than an average expert in his field, Driver would apparently heartily applaud him. However, would she be bound to admire him even more if he acquired the belief that hardly any of his hundreds of publications contains a single valid result? Is it reasonable also to assume that if the great mathematician managed somehow to convince himself that he is not quite sure what $5+7$ might amount to, then he would have to be held in the highest form of reverence for his heroic humility?

Thesis 4: Owen Flanagan, writing in the same journal in 1990, criticizes Driver's position and advances instead what he calls the "nonoverestimation account." He claims that a modest individual is required only not to overestimate his accomplishments and worth.

One is likely to find this interpretation beset with its own problems. Consider the case of the engineer who, unaware that this has been done long before, has after many years of effort discovered how to construct a flying-machine. Being an unusually unassuming person, he finds sufficient satisfaction in his "knowledge" of being the first individual in history to build an airplane, and refrains altogether from publicizing his achievement. The engineer may well be charged with shocking ignorance, but in spite of his gross overestimation of his place in the history of technology, few would wish to censure him for arrogance.

Now, let us suppose that our engineer lived in the 19th century. His

conviction of being the first ever to put together successfully a flying machine, would then have corresponded to reality and thus he would not have been guilty of overestimating his accomplishment. At the same time let us also suppose that after making his discovery he could think of nothing else but the magnificence of his fertile mind, that he brought up the matter in every conversation, refused to associate with and treated with contempt anyone who could lay no claim to a comparable achievement. Most of us would regard such an individual irksomely self-infatuated.

The first example indicates that nonoverestimation of oneself is not a necessary condition. The last example demonstrates nonoverestimation is not a sufficient condition for the exemplification of humility.

III.

I believe that the assertion of any kind of false or true statements about facts, or the harboring of correct or incorrect beliefs concerning how things actually are, plays no substantial role in determining the humility of an individual. Instead, humility is a function of the attitude a person has toward certain facts and of the significance he attaches to them. It has to do with the focus of an individual's attention, the relative importance he attaches to various merits, talents and achievements, and the kind of thoughts that occupy his mind. As a first step toward the clarification of this idea let me formulate what may be suggested to be the first axiom in the study of humility:

A person exemplifies modesty when he does not regard any of his moral or intellectual endowments or acts as more important—just because it is his—than comparable ones of other people.

This axiom on its own provides some indication of the elusiveness of our topic. Among other things, it implies that overt behavior has only a tenuous connection with humility, the core of which lies unexposed in the recesses of the mind.

It is corollary of our axiom that if X and Y have to their credit identical achievements, X will not ascribe greater value to his than to Y's. This corollary implies grave obstacles against detecting the vainglory that X may harbor in his heart. Different individuals have different backgrounds, aims and ambitions. They are differently equipped physically, mentally and emotionally; their needs are different, and so on. All these tend to prevent an accurate comparison of their achievement. Of course, the more varied the circumstances under which we observe someone, the closer we may approximate to a correct evaluation.

What basic character trait would ensure the kind of attitude described by our axiom? It may very well be exemplified by someone who is fully

aware of all his accomplishments, but his attention does not constantly focus on these. Consider an immensely talented individual who made unparalleled contributions to our understanding of nature, someone like Einstein, regarded as one of the three greatest physicists in history. When his achievement is viewed in an overall perspective against a comprehensive background of the sum total of the various scientific, as well as all literary, musical and other artistic creations, the magnitude of his contribution to the enrichment of our lives, appears differently. It, after all, constitutes only a small percentage of the entire harvest of human genius. From an objective standpoint, even an individual's most remarkable handiwork amounts only to a small fraction of all the splendid creations deserving to command our interests. Modesty thus amounts to the tendency to adopt the objective perspective. A truly humble person will come close to distributing his attention even-handedly, and consequently will focus his thoughts only briefly and infrequently on what is notable specifically about himself.

IV

The 18th century Rabbi Akiva Eiger is often referred to as a paradigm of humility. Let me illustrate why, by relating what may possibly be the shortest of the many stories that are typically told about him. R. Akiva Eiger and R. Yaakov Lorberbaum of Lissa spent a Shabbat in the same lodging-house in Warsaw. In the afternoon when R. Akiva sat alone in the lounge, someone entered and announced "I have come to see *Rabbenu* (our Master)." R. Akiva invited the visitor to have a seat, informing him "*Rabbenu* stepped out for a moment; I expect him back soon."³ Now, of course R. Yaakov was a major luminary in the Torah world, yet it is generally agreed that R. Akiva was one of his kind both in his unique powers of compressed analysis and saintly conduct. He was too intelligent to be quite unaware of this. So, assuming the story's veracity, why the unhesitating belief that the visitor was not referring to him?

I believe that an answer is possible without imputing to R. Akiva any affectation, or polite but false expression of modesty. He knew the facts about himself, but he did not attend to them most of the time. On this particular Shabbat what may have fully occupied his thoughts was the profound joy at having the chance to spend many hours in the company of his admired friend R. Yaakov. Thus his immediate reaction to the visitor's remark was prompted by what at that moment occupied his thoughts.

Rabbi I.Z. Meltzer was arguably the most prominent Torah scholar in the middle of this century and was well known for his remarkable modesty. Once a scholar published an article in the Torah journal *Sinai*, arguing that R. Meltzer's widely known work *Even Haazel* contains many errors and fallacious reasoning. The incident caused a fairly strong uproar among the stu-

dents of the yeshiva. After a while, a senior student of Rabbi Meltzer came to see him and to tell him that after a certain amount of work he was able to refute all the allegations of the scholar and show that R. Meltzer committed not a single error, and that he is about to send a copy of his findings to the editor of that journal. To this, the rabbi's swift reaction was "You are to do nothing of the sort! You probably are not aware that the author of the polemical essay has regrettably undergone a series of misfortunes as a result of which he has become deeply depressed. Surely I cannot allow you to deprive a man in such a deplorable state of mind whatever joy and satisfaction he may have derived from being able to refute some of my theses."

This incident reveals R. Meltzer as the exceptionally generous person he was known to be. However, those familiar with him and with members of the Yeshiva world were inclined to conjecture that many a person, no less generous, would have acted differently. Surely, they would have readily given of their money and time to help the unfortunate man overcome his sorrow, but may have felt that it was imperative that the truth be made public and the false ideas people have gained from the critical article be corrected. From an objective standpoint, the validity of any complex argument can never be certain, while the desirability of comforting the afflicted is beyond question. Yet, some learned men, even of considerable good will, may have allowed their judgement to be influenced by the question of whether the results of their own intellectual labor or that of someone else needs to be sacrificed. We admire R. Meltzer for his ability to adopt the objective view.

VI

A detailed and most instructive description of our topic may be found in Rabbi Moshe Hayyim Luzzato's *Mesilat Yesharim*: In the section on humility, he explains that

The man of understanding will, upon reflection, realize that there is not justification for pride or vainglory, even if he was privileged to become very learned. A man of understanding, who has acquired more knowledge than the average person, has accomplished nothing more than what his nature impelled him to do. . . .

Whatever good a man possesses is due to the Divine grace accorded to him, . . .

He should be grateful to God who has thus been gracious to him, and for this reason be humble.

On reflection it should become evident that the quoted passage is very much in harmony with the axiom formulated earlier. Suppose that my

neighbor and I each grow an orchard which, in the view of disinterested observers, are almost indiscernible from one another in beauty and the quality of the trees and fruit. It should nevertheless not seem unnatural if I, having invested so much of my thoughts, skills, time and energy in caring for my orchard, am unable to maintain an objective attitude and become convinced that every tree of mine is superior to any of my neighbor's. Consider, on the other hand, a situation where my neighbor and I each have just happened to be given as a free gift virtually identical orchards. In this case it is far more likely that I shall judge the orchards objectively. The orchard which came into my possession gratuitously does not contain any part of my "self"; there is no reason why my emotions should cloud my judgement and prevent me to see things as they are.

If were to heed the counsel of Ramhal, then I would treat the mental and physical resources which I invested in the orchard I grew as an unearned gift. My judgement would not become entangled with my ego and I would reach an objective assessment in comparing the orchards to each other.

VII.

The last Mishna in *Sota* contains a passage that has constituted a source of puzzlement. The Mishna declares that since R. Yehudah the Prince has passed away, true humility is no longer to be found. R. Yosef is recorded to have protested—uttering a seemingly paradoxical sentence—"Do not say that true humility is no longer to be found; after all I exist!" Can a genuinely modest person speak like this? Is R. Yosef's protest not self-refuting? Presumably, however, R. Yosef was a notably humble individual in the true sense of the word. He was bound to be aware of it, assuming he was highly intelligent and not prone to self-deception. Naturally, it was not his wont to shout this from the rooftops, but we may also surmise that he did not spend time on self-congratulations and that none of his achievements in general was much at the center of his thoughts. Owing to his righteousness, his thoughts were bound to focus away from himself, toward his friends, disciples, the needy, ideas, scholarship and good deeds. Several commentators, though explain that on this occasion he felt impelled to draw attention to his own humility for the moral welfare of others. People, should not draw the wrong inference from the Mishna lamenting the loss of the kind of humility exemplified by R. Yehudah and conclude that in contemporary, spiritually impoverished society, it is no longer worth trying.

The well known Hebrew writer, J. Klatzkin, stated categorically, "One who is well aware that he is humble is no longer humble."⁴ On the surface, he seems right. On a closer inspection, however, we should reject the idea that any genuine virtue, pursued by all rational souls, should demand igno-

TRADITION

rance or unawareness of that virtue. We should agree with Klatzkin that to the degree an individual *dwells* how humble he is, to that degree he lacks humility.

* * *

The major difficulty described in the first section was that *humility* is held to be the supreme virtue, when the absence of it, unlike the absence of other virtues, does not appear to constitute a serious threat to the welfare of others. By now we realize that the crucial importance for modesty consists in its position as the solid basis for all other virtues.

An individual who tends to view objectively the relative merit of a vast variety of aptitudes and achievements, as well as the order of importance among many wants and longings, is one whose thoughts are not constantly focusing on his ego. His attention is likely to be distributed over a wide spectrum of needs, causes, and concerns. He will, therefore, appreciate the significance of the wants, hopes and strivings of others, and share their joys and frustrations. Thus the virtue of other-directedness, the core of humility, is the ultimate source for all other characteristics which involve an impartial concern for worthy ideals and causes, and which require sympathy for the well-being of others. Righteous moral behavior is grounded in an outlook that is close enough to the objective perspective, and, therefore, ranks sentiments, accomplishments, needs and aspirations in accordance with their actual, inherent order of importance.

NOTES

1. Cf. Abrahams, Israel, *Ethical Wills*, V.1., p.95.
2. Humility and modesty differ in magnitude only. I shall use the two terms interchangeably.
3. I.M. Lipson, *Midot Dor* (Tel Aviv, 1968), p.267.
4. *In Praise of Wisdom* (1943), p.303.